DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 620 UD 033 226

AUTHOR Rentner, Diane Stark; Jennings, Jack; Kober, Nancy
TITLE Public Schools: A Place Where Children Can Learn To Get Along with Others in a Diverse Society.
INSTITUTION Center on Education Policy, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1998-12-00
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consciousness Raising; Cultural Awareness; *Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Interpersonal Competence; *Public Schools; School Responsibility; *Student Attitudes; Students

ABSTRACT

Public schools are one of the main institutions that create cohesion among diverse groups of individuals. Schools are places where children can learn social and citizenship skills that help them live harmoniously and become contributing members of society. Research shows that parents recognize that getting along with others is a necessary skill. Though many of today's public schools are racially and economically isolated, these shortcomings do not diminish the importance of teaching children to be tolerant of differences and to understand and respect other cultures and other people's views. It is important for children to learn tolerance and respect because: the United States is becoming more diverse; the workforce is becoming more diverse and the economy more international; and national cohesion and social harmony depend on people overcoming divisions and understanding each other. Public schools are good places for children to learn respect and tolerance of others because: they better reflect the diversity of American society than private schools; they are a place where children learn social skills naturally; and throughout U.S. history, they have helped to promote social harmony. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 436 620

Public Schools:

A Place where children can learn to get along with others in a diverse society

By the Center on Education Policy

Public schools are one of the main institutions that create cohesion among diverse groups of Americans.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John Jennings

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD033226

When parents make judgments about the schools in their communities, they usually consider such factors as whether the schools offer a rich, high-quality educational experience, whether they have a safe and orderly environment, and how well they prepare students for higher education and jobs. Without a doubt, these factors are critical. But schools are also places where children learn social and citizenship skills that help them to live harmoniously and become contributing members of society. In a nation as complex and diverse as the United States, a critical part of becoming a good citizen is learning how to get along with others, especially those whose racial, ethnic, religious, or economic backgrounds are different from our own.

Parents recognize that getting along with others is a necessary skill. In a 1998 survey by Public Agenda, 97% of White parents and 97% of Black parents agreed with this statement: "Our country is very diverse and kids need to learn to get along with people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds."

Public schools are one of the main institutions that create cohesion among diverse groups of Americans. For more than 150 years, public schools, or "common schools" as they were once known, have played a vital role by bringing together young people from various backgrounds and preparing them for the responsibilities of citizenship. Admittedly, not all public schools live up to this ideal of producing informed citizens. Nor do all public schools enroll rich and poor, immigrant and native-born, and children from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many public schools today are racially and economically isolated. But these shortcomings do not diminish the importance of teaching children to be tolerant of differences, to understand and appreciate other cultures, and to respect other people's views.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Why is it in the national interest for children to learn tolerance and respect for those different from themselves?

The children of today will come of age in a United States that has greater racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity than ever before.

1. Our nation is becoming more diverse.

The children of today will come of age in a United States that has greater racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity than ever before. Immigration is a major contributor to this diversity. We are in the midst of the largest sustained wave of immigration that the nation has ever experienced. By the middle of the next century, demographers predict that no single racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority.

- In 1997, 35% of children under the age of 18 were from minority groups. By 2020, this proportion is expected to increase to 45%.
- Today, 20% of the children in school are immigrants or have parents who are immigrants. In contrast to earlier waves of immigration, most new arrivals to our nation come from Asia and Latin America; only 12% come from European nations.
- The U.S. is becoming more religiously diverse, with Islam the fastest-growing religion in the nation.

2. Our workforce is becoming more diverse and our economy more international.

Our children will enter an American workforce that is diverse in composition and global in reach. The economies of the world are becoming more and more linked, and developing nations are becoming increasingly important in our trade relations. An essential job skill for the 21st century will be the ability to relate well to people—both at home and abroad—who come from many different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The U.S. is unlikely to remain economically competitive unless our workers know how to cooperate with each other and to deal effectively in the global marketplace.

- The U.S. has regained its position as the world's largest exporter, with considerable growth in exports of manufactured goods, high technology goods, services, and agriculture. Trade is now equivalent to nearly 30% of our GNP—up from 13% in 1970.
- The fastest growing markets for U.S. goods and services are in Latin America and the Caribbean. By 2000, our exports to these two destinations are projected to outstrip our exports to the European Union. We are also expanding our trade activity in Asia.

3. National cohesion and social harmony depend on people overcoming divisions and understanding each other.

The tranquility of our communities will depend on people being able to reach consensus about solutions to the problems of the day. Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, Asians, and Native Americans will all need to be tolerant and respectful of each other, or we run the risk of great social unrest, political upheaval, and economic decline. Our children, our grandchildren, and our nation will pay a very high price in the years ahead if our country is divided along racial, ethnic, religious, or economic lines.

- The war in Bosnia and other ethnic and religious conflicts around the globe illustrate what can happen when groups of people cannot achieve a common national identity.

Why are public schools a good place for children to learn respect and tolerance of others?

1. In general, public schools better reflect the diversity of American society than private schools.

Public schools enroll a more diverse student population than do private schools or many other institutions, like churches and clubs.

- In 1993-94, nearly one-third of public school students were from racial or ethnic minority groups, as compared with 20% of private school students.
- Public schools educate students of many different religions, unlike private schools, which are often sponsored by a particular religious group.
- Public schools are also more likely to enroll children who speak a variety of languages; more than 150 languages are spoken by the limited-English-proficient populations in our public schools. Schools with linguistically diverse populations can provide rich learning opportunities for both children who speak English and children who speak a different language.
- The vast majority of children with disabilities are served in public schools.
- In general, public schools are more likely than private schools to enroll children from a variety of economic backgrounds.

2. Public schools are a place where children learn social skills naturally.

In diverse public schools, students can learn about other races, ethnic groups, and cultures through normal interactions, observations, and friendships, rather than through stereotypes and prejudices, or through television, movies, and books.

- As the number of gated communities grows, and as communities in some areas become more economically stratified, it is increasingly important for children to learn alongside people who are different from their families and neighbors.

3. Throughout our nation's history, public schools have helped to promote social harmony.

During earlier waves of immigration, public schools were one of the primary institutions responsible for building a common culture and teaching democratic virtues. More recently, public schools have helped to promote progress in civil rights by bringing together children of different races during the formative years, before prejudices have taken root. Social harmony remains an important goal, but we cannot take for granted that it will happen on its own. Whether our children and grandchildren will live in harmony or discord will be influenced in large part by their educational experiences.

- As just one indicator of advances in racial tolerance, the fraction of Whites who said in the Gallup polls that they would move if Black families moved in next door fell dramatically from 44% in 1958 to 1% in 1997 (this question was not asked consistently of people of other races).

In diverse public schools, students can learn about other races, ethnic groups, and cultures through normal interactions, observations, and friendships.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Conclusion

Instead of advocating that students abandon the public schools, we must all work together to improve public schools, so they are all safe places of learning that offer a quality education. With those elements in place, all public schools will be able to fulfill their unique role in our democracy and help to promote tolerance and respect among our nation's diverse population.

Sources

Barshefsky, Charlene, U.S. Trade Representative, Testimony before the Trade Subcommittee, Ways and Means Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, March 18, 1997.

Council of Economic Advisers for the President's Initiative on Race, *Changing America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being by Race and Hispanic Origin* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1998).

Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being* (Washington, DC: U.S.Government Printing Office, 1998).

Hodgkinson, Harold, "The Demographics of Diversity," Principal, September 1998 (Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals).

Hodgkinson, Harold, "The Demographics of Special Education," paper developed for the Institute for At-Risk Infants, Children, and Youth and Their Families and the Department of Special Education, College of Education, University of South Florida, September 1997.

Hodgkinson, Harold, "Lashes–Back, Front, and Sideways," paper developed for the Aspen Institute, June 1997.

Public Agenda, *Time to Move On* (New York: Public Agenda, 1998).

Riley, Richard, U.S. Secretary of Education, statement on California Proposition 227, April 27, 1998.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile*, 1993-94 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-94* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Other data come from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs website and from an analysis of the October 1997 Current Population Survey conducted by the National Education Data Resource Center.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

© Copyright December 1998, Center on Education Policy

CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY **CEP**

WHO WE ARE

The Center on Education Policy is the independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we try to help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools. The Center receives its funding from charitable foundations such as The Pew Charitable Trusts, The George Gund Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, and Phi Delta Kappa International.

STAFF

John F. Jennings, *Director*; Diane Stark Rentner, *Associate Director*; Toni Painter, *Administrative Assistant*

HOW TO REACH US

Center on Education Policy
1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 619
Washington, D.C. 20036
Phone: 202-822-8065
Fax: 202-822-6008
Email: ctredpol@ctredpol.org

VISIT OUR WEBSITE!
www.ctredpol.org